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ABSTRACT

Noting that socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural variations among fathers and differences in family structure may affect fathers' roles and their level of involvement with their children, this brief summarizes key research findings on the ways in which various factors influence fathers' involvement in children's lives. Regarding socioeconomic influences, indicators such as education level, income, and social class have been found to be linked to father involvement; for instance, fathers with higher levels of education are more accessible to and engaged with their school-age children. Bleak economic conditions may lead fathers to seek alternative ways to be involved with their children. Regarding racial and ethnic variations, research has revealed variations in the amount and type of father involvement based on the racial/ethnic background of the father; however, there are perhaps as many or more similarities as there are differences. Regarding family structure, research has not kept pace with changes in family structure and children's living arrangements. Research does indicate that stepfathers vary in how involved they are in their parenting roles; single custodial fathers vary in their parenting role; and fathers who live apart from their children are usually much less involved with their children than fathers who reside with them. (Contains 28 endnotes.) (EV)

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How Do Social, Economic, and Cultural Factors Influence Fathers' Involvement with Their Children?

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Socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural variations among fathers and differences in family structure may affect fathers' roles and their level of involvement with their children. This brief summarizes key research findings on the ways in which various factors influence fathers' involvement in children's lives.

Socioeconomic Influences

Socioeconomic indicators such as education level, income, and social class have been found to be linked to father involvement.

- National-level studies have consistently found strong links between socioeconomic status and father involvement. For instance, two national studies reveal that fathers with higher levels of education are more accessible to and engaged with their school-age children.[1]

- Fathers who are able to provide economically for their children are more likely to stay invested in their marriages or partner relationships, and are more likely to be engaged with and nurturing of their children -- even if they live apart from their children.[2]

- Conversely, fathers who are unemployed or underemployed are more likely to limit their involvement with their families. This may be due in part to the high societal value placed on fathers as economic providers; some men may feel that if they are not able to provide financially for their family they should not (or cannot) be involved in other ways.

- Unemployed fathers are less likely to form families or assume responsibility for their children born outside of marriage.[3]

- Within a marriage, economic hardship can create a stressful and sometimes hostile environment, with men being the primary instigators of angry outbursts.[4]

- There is some evidence that daily participation in child care is higher among fathers in lower-level white-collar jobs and professional jobs, and lower among self-employed fathers, fathers in blue-collar jobs, and those in middle or high management positions.[5] These findings may be related to work hours and/or the amount of flexibility in work schedules associated with different types of employment.

Bleak economic conditions may lead fathers to seek alternative ways to be involved with their children.

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- A study of American Indian families found that fathers saw themselves more as protectors and disciplinarians of their children than as economic providers.[6] This is in contrast with the perspective of the majority culture, which places great value on fathers as economic providers. The beliefs of the American Indian fathers in this study may reflect levels of unemployment in their communities that are so high that men seek out other, positive ways to define themselves as involved fathers.

- In another study, a group of extremely low-income African American fathers saw their main contribution to their children as being emotionally available to them, rather than providing their children with economic support.[7]

Racial and Ethnic Variations

Research has revealed variations in the amount and type of father involvement based on the racial/ethnic background of the father. In reviewing these findings, it is important to bear in mind that some of these variations may reflect socioeconomic and residential status more than race or ethnicity.

- Several national surveys have found that African American fathers who do not live with their children are more likely than their white or Hispanic counterparts to share in housework and childcare tasks, participate in childrearing decisions, and visit their children.[8]

- African American fathers have been found to be less likely than white fathers to read to their children, but are more likely than white fathers to play with them.[9]

Despite these variations, there are perhaps as many or more similarities as there are differences in father involvement across racial/ethnic groups.

- Certain fathering roles seem to cross cultures. These include fathers as economic providers, protectors, caregivers, and teachers.[10]

- Low-income fathers from African American, Mexican American, and white backgrounds express similar concerns for their children and care for them in similar ways.[11]

- Small-scale studies have found that middle-income Mexican American fathers are similar to middle-income white fathers with regard to their emphasis on the role of economic provider,[12] and middle-income African American fathers have been found to be similar to middle-income European American fathers in terms of their attitudes toward childrearing and levels of involvement.[13]

We still do not know much about the childrearing attitudes and practices of fathers in understudied groups (such as, American Indians, Hispanics, Asians, recent immigrants, low-income whites, and middle-income, married African Americans).

Family Structure

Research on father involvement has not kept pace with changes in family structure and children's living arrangements.

- Although most of the father involvement research has been conducted with biological fathers living in two-parent families, only 25% of African American children and two-thirds of white children lived with both biological parents in 1992.[14]

Stepfathers vary in how involved they are in their parenting roles.

- Stepfathers may be more or less involved with their step-children depending on whether their biological children are

also part of the family,[15] the age of the step-child at the time the new family was formed,[16] the quality of the relationship between the stepfather and his wife or partner,[17] and the step-child's relationship with his or her biological father.[18] Men who live with their step-children and their own biological children, and those men who become step-fathers when their step-children are young, tend to be more involved.

Single custodial fathers vary in their parenting role.

- Although single-father families are still rare, (they account for 3-5 percent of all families with children),[19] their numbers have increased rapidly over the past twenty years.[20] Single fathers are more likely to be African American than are married fathers,[21] and though children in single-father families are better off financially than children in single-mother families, they are still not as well off as children in two-parent families.[22]

- There are several factors which may affect the way fathers approach the role of single custodial parent. Not surprisingly, fathers who actively seek out custody of their children tend to adjust more easily to the parenting role. Other factors which may affect a single custodial father's approach to parenting include the age and gender of the children, his ability to balance work and parenting responsibilities, the relationship that he has with his ex-wife or partner, his age and educational level,[23] and the circumstances in which the child was conceived.

Fathers who live apart from their children are usually much less involved with their children than fathers who reside with them.[24]

- Although many nonresident fathers are initially involved in their children's lives, this involvement tends to taper off over time, particularly among men who were never married to their child's mother.[25]

- Fathers who do not live with their children tend to be more involved when they live nearby,[26] when they have a positive relationship with the child's mother, and when they have financial resources and work experience.[27] Factors that negatively affect father involvement include conflicts with the child's mother, a lack of financial resources, a new spouse or partner, and geographic mobility.[28]

This research brief was written by Tamara Halle, Ph.D. and Suzanne Le Menestrel, Ph.D. It is based on literature reviews prepared by Angela Dungee Greene, M.A., Tamara Halle, Ph.D., Suzanne Le Menestrel, Ph.D., and Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D. for the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. The views expressed are those of Child Trends; no endorsement by the government should be inferred.

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